Democracy and City Life

What is *democracy*? At the dawn of our philosophical and legal traditions in the West, answers to this question were intimately bound up with city life—although not, to be sure, a life that many of us today would recognize as urban. Yet the city, such as it was, must have loomed large in the imagination of an ancient Athenian, or indeed a Roman citizen even at the height of Rome's empire. The spaces of the city – the markets and assemblies, the courts and temples – were the sites of democratic and republican rule, even when the reach of a civilization was vast.

Today the city is entwined in most every major facet of social, cultural, and economic life, as it has been throughout much of the modern age: we are an urban civilization. Creative genius, scientific innovation, webs of commerce, extraordinary human diversity, as well as the great divide between rich and poor: all find familiar and enduring expressions – in art, commentary, scholarship – against the backdrop of the metropolis.

Still, we have lost much sense of the urban roots of our democratic vocabulary. The words, values, and practices we now associate with democracy have been forged against very different geographic realities. The sovereign territorial state, inherited centuries ago after the Peace of Westphalia, dominates our imagination, even as many of our most pressing dilemmas cross the borders of those vast and powerful states, challenging the capacities of governments at every scale. Surely any plausible innovations in how we understand and practice democracy must lie beyond the tired legacy of Westphalia?

Some of what we mean by democracy surely must change to take account of present and future circumstances, especially concerns for global justice and environmental stewardship. My aim, however, is to elaborate the

concept of democracy in ways that remind us of these early urban roots, and that may, in later chapters, help us to draw new insight and inspiration from the city – in all of its historical richness and myriad forms – as a resource for liberal values and democratic hopes.

That ambition will seem curious, perhaps foolish, to those who indict liberalism as at best a naive philosophical conceit, at worst the intellectual harbinger of empire and exclusion. According to this critic, the marriage of liberalism and democracy thwarts genuinely inclusive and responsive politics, by limiting the power of citizens to address past wrongs; to forge an inclusive and respectful public sphere; to correct unjustified inequalities; or even to imagine a viable alternative to the prevailing orders.

Indeed, for all that liberals talk about freedom and fairness, the very category of *citizenship* in liberal democracies is carefully policed, defined as much by who is excluded as by who is embraced. Just as in ancient Athens, or the chartered medieval cities whose air allegedly made one free ('*stadtluft macht frei*'), citizenship is a jealously guarded title, and so we find in our liberal democracies many hardworking, law-abiding residents effectively denied that standing. If 'the people' are ever truly to rule themselves, as moral equals in spite of manifest diversity and deep disagreements, then liberalism is the problem, not the solution.

I am sympathetic to these critics, many of whom draw powerful lessons from the experiences of city life, showing us how our familiar understandings of citizenship and legitimacy are more complex, ambiguous, and conflicted than we might hope. I mean to give these critical voices their due. Mine is a hopeful story, however, about how we can strengthen the union of liberal values and democratic hopes in a diverse and unequal world. The city, in all of its richness and contradictions, can show us how.